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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREF](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [CO](#)
SUBJECT: INDIGENOUS PROTESTS TO BLOCK PAN AMERICAN HIGHWAY
IN PRE-ELECTION PERIOD RESULT IN ONE DEATH

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood.
Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) On May 15-19, approximately 16,000 indigenous people and supporters in 9 Departments blocked major highways to protest perceived GOC failure to follow through on land agreements. The demonstrations, which GOC authorities said were instigated and supported by the FARC, also criticized presidential reelection and the free trade agreement. UN High Commissioner for Refugees reps investigating the deaths of five men who participated in the protests, met with a self described paramilitary commander who said he would kill FARC members and threatened protesters returning home who could not produce national identity cards as guerrilla collaborators. UNHCR also raised concerns about armed men in civilian clothing apparently coordinating with security forces during the protests. Colombian security forces are investigating and told UNHCR they were plainclothes DIJIN officials. End summary.

A BROAD RANGE OF INTERESTS EXPRESSED OVER A WIDE AREA

¶2. (U) Beginning on Monday, May 15, approximately 16,000 members of several indigenous, Afrocolombian and peasant ("campesino") associations held demonstrations in the departments of Caldas, Cauca, Cordoba, Cundinamarca, Huila, Narino, Putumayo, Risaralda, Tolima, and in Bogota. Protesters said they wanted to open a dialogue with the GOC on the issues of reelection, the Free Trade Agreement, the Justice and Peace law, impunity in cases against indigenous people, sovereignty of the GOC over indigenous reservations, a lack of educational and social programs on reservations, a desire that the GOC purchase and deliver lands where indigenous people were squatting, transportation problems, and rights for poor farmers in the cocaine growing trade. The protests ended on May 19.

BLOCKING "PAN AMERICAN HIGHWAY" LEADS TO VIOLENT SCUFFLE

¶3. (U) On May 16, approximately 5,000 protesters at the "La Maria" farm in Cauca Department -- controlled by indigenous people -- set up a roadblock on the highway outside the farm. (This "Pan American" highway connects Ecuador with Colombia and continues northward through Narino and Cauca

departments.) Protesters stood and used rocks, tree branches and cars to block the road, while the Ministry of Interior and Justice issued a cease and desist order the same day. Over the next three days, the Colombian National Police (CNP) worked with the Anti-Riot Police (ESMAD) to enforce the order and remove the protesters from the road. Protesters periodically removed and replaced the roadblock from one lane, allowing intermittent circulation of traffic while refusing to leave the road entirely.

¶4. (C) On May 16, helicopters from ESMAD flew over the road and dropped canisters of tear gas to disperse the crowd. According to Colonel Jorge Vargas, Director of Intelligence Collection for the CNP, the confrontation turned violent after police were allegedly attacked with small arms fire by the crowd, wounding several officers. Vargas claimed that the police were not carrying firearms, only billy clubs, and that representatives from the International Red Cross were able to gain access to the area to treat the wounded. Juan Carlos Gomez, Director of the Human Rights Unit for the Ministry of Defense, said over 60 police officers were wounded, and one was permanently paralyzed after having been hit on the spine with a club.

¶5. (C) According to Ms. Filsa Arias, Director of Communications for ONIC, one of the largest indigenous organizations participating in the protests, the police fired into the crowd and killed one demonstrator. Arias also claimed none of the protesters were carrying any firearms, though of the 83 injured 8 had firearm wounds, and that the wounded were treated in the medical clinic on the "La Maria" grounds or evacuated by ambulance. A final official assessment of the number of wounded and the official cause of death of the indigenous protester is ongoing.

GOC SENDS HIGH-LEVEL DELEGATION TO THE SCENE

¶6. (C) On May 19, a delegation traveled to "La Maria" that included Minister of Justice and the Interior Sabas Pretelt, Vice Minister of the Interior Hernan Angarita, Director of Colombian National Police Jorge Daniel Castro, Commander of the Army General Mario Montoya, and Director of the Vice President's Program on Human Rights Carlos Franco. The delegation convinced the protesters to disperse and open a dialogue after the presidential elections on May 28.

¶7. (S) On May 23, Roberto Meier, the UNHCR representative for Colombia (strictly protect) told the Embassy Refugee Coordinator that one of his teams in Pasto (Narino Department) heard rumors that five of the 3,500 plus protesters, had been murdered on the way home. UNHCR reps traveled to El Egidio (approximately 2 and a half hours north of Pasto) where local residents confirmed that the men had been killed. Shortly afterwards, several armed men in civilian clothes approached the UNHCR team and said the local paramilitary commander wanted to speak to them. The UNHCR team met "Commander Hernando Paz" whom they said was dressed in military gear with AUC patches. Commander Paz said he was aware of UNHCR's humanitarian activities in Pasto, as well as the reason they came to El Egidio, and had no problem with the UNHCR. But he was aware the FARC forced some people to participate in the protests. According to Commander Paz, FARC collaborators did not bring their ID cards with them to avoid detection by the authorities. UNHCR reps reported that Commander Paz said he knew who the FARC collaborators and active members were among the protesters, and would kill them. He also threatened to kill those without national ID cards (for being FARC or FARC collaborators). UNHCR is coordinating a safe return for the protesters (which began 5/26) with the assistance of local and national government, security forces, UNDP, IOM, the Ombudsman and OCHA.

¶8. (S) UNHCR Rep Meier said he and his team also saw armed men in civilian clothing they believed to be coordinating with security forces during the protests. Meier met

personally with Colombian Army General Avila, police and GoC officials May 19 to discuss the issue. UNHCR shared photos of the men with Colombian security forces who identified two of them as plainclothes DIJIN officials. The GoC will continue to investigate.

¶9. (S) On May 25, Colonel Vargas told Poloff the Police believed the FARC coordinated the protests with local indigenous groups for almost a month. Vargas said the FARC told people if they didn't participate they would be fined or wouldn't be allowed to return to their homes. Vargas said the Police had over 60 recordings of telephone conversations between the commanders of the south western fronts of the FARC -- fronts 6, 8, 29, and 60 -- and leaders of the indigenous groups, providing tactical details about where to block the highway; how to get food, water, gas and logistical support from operatives from the different fronts in the field; and how to direct the protests in such a way as to make them difficult to control or diminish. Vargas said some of the recordings were done during the protests, while callers were checking in to report how things were going.

Comment

¶10. (C) VM Angarita told Poloff the delegation was surprised to learn that none of the issues raised by the protesters were related to ongoing arguments over settlements for land. Indigenous groups staged extensive demonstrations in September and November 2005 to protest slow implementation of previous land agreements made by the GOC. Angarita suggested that the laundry list of complaints raised by the demonstrators -- many of which cannot be negotiated, like the law on presidential reelection -- was evidence that the protests were organized to create an environment critical of the GOC during the election period.
WOOD